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# Journal of Service Research

## **When heroes and villains are victims: How different withdrawal strategies moderate the depleting effects of customer incivility on frontline employees**

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**WHEN HEROES AND VILLAINS ARE VICTIMS: HOW DIFFERENT WITHDRAWAL STRATEGIES MODERATE THE DEPLETING EFFECTS OF CUSTOMER INCIVILITY ON FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES**

**Abstract**

Withdrawal from work by frontline employees is generally perceived by managers as counterproductive or anti-service behavior. However, there may be detrimental effects of continuing to provide a service, particularly after a frontline employee has experienced incivility. The possible *beneficial* effects of withdrawal on frontline service employees' well-being have rarely been investigated. In this paper, we conducted two studies to examine the moderating role of on- and off-task withdrawal behaviors on the relationship between customer incivility and employees' emotional exhaustion. In Study 1, we examined parking officers' reactions to customer incivility. We found support for the role of off-task withdrawal as a resource-replenishing strategy, which mitigated the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion. In Study 2, we examined a sample of nurses in a large hospital to compare the replenishing potential of both on-task and off-task withdrawal strategies. We found that off-task withdrawal served a replenishing function, while on-task withdrawal aggravated nurses' feeling of emotional exhaustion as a result of customer incivility. These results highlight different resource implications, including recovery benefits of short-term withdrawal behaviors at work, and provides important theoretical and practical implications for the management of customer incivility and frontline service employees' well-being and performance.

*Key Words:* Withdrawal; Customer incivility; Emotional exhaustion; Experience sampling method

The need for frontline employees (FLEs) to promptly recover after uncivil encounters with customers is crucial for their service performance and well-being (Harris and Reynolds 2003; Koopmann, Wang, Liu, and Song 2015). This is particularly relevant within the context of the COVID19 pandemic, as social distancing policies and increased customer stress due to panic buying and safety concerns have exacerbated customer incivility. Examples of customers behaving aggressively, refusing to follow directions, fighting for essential products, and venting negative moods are reported by media at an alarming rate. Incidents of customer incivility not only prevent FLEs from providing effective service, but they also exacerbate FLEs' elevated levels of strain and stress during these turbulent times (Voorhees, Fombelle, and Bone 2020).

Even during 'normal' times, delivering excellent service is challenging and requires FLEs to be actively engaged and committed to their service roles (Donavan, Brown, and Mowen 2004). Empirical evidence supports a strong relationship between FLEs' work engagement and positive service outcomes, such as perceived service quality and higher customer satisfaction (Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes 2002). Conversely, FLEs' disengagement and withdrawal from service tasks is associated with customer dissatisfaction, complaints, and poor performance ratings from managers (Kao et al. 2014). Conceptually, withdrawal behaviors are classified under the nomenclature of negative service behaviors, such as service sabotage or anti-service behaviors (Harris and Ogbonna 2002). From the customers' perspective, FLE withdrawal behaviors have been shown to impair customer satisfaction and service quality (e.g., Hausknecht, Trevor, and Howard 2009) and are often viewed as anti-service, since these behaviors slow down the service process and cause service failure (McCollough, Berry, and Yadav 2000). Given these negative consequences, both academics and practitioners have been motivated to find ways to reduce FLEs' withdrawal behaviors, tending to see such behaviors as unequivocally counterproductive.

However, recent evidence from the organizational behavior literature suggest that not all withdrawal behaviors are negative, with the potential to have a recovery and replenishing

function. For example, disengagement that occurs outside of working hours and/or the workplace itself, including relaxation after work (Sonnentag and Fritz 2015) or during lunch breaks (Troughakos et al. 2008), and taking holidays (Etzion, Eden, and Lapidot 1998) have been shown to be effective in mitigating the negative impact of job demands and stressors. The replenishing effects of withdrawal that occurs during work hours, however, are less well established. As many of these studies have been conducted in non-service contexts, the role of FLEs as active agents in managing their resource recovery following customer incivility is largely unknown. This is surprising, given that most studies on customer incivility draw on theories that assume individuals themselves take a proactive role in preserving and acquiring resources (e.g., conservation of resources (COR), Hobfoll 1989). Studies in service failure have discussed tactics that FLEs can implement, as well as tactic effectiveness, to mitigate the consequence of customer incivility (e.g., Roschk and Gelbrich 2014). But these studies have mainly been customer-focused and operationalize “effectiveness” as the extent to which customers’ satisfaction can be restored. For example, strategies such as offering an apology or financial compensation have been tested for their effectiveness in mitigating customers’ negative response after service failure (Haenel, Wetzel, and Hammerschmidt 2019). This focus on the customer ignores the potential impact of such events on FLEs themselves, as well as what FLEs can do to mitigate these effects. Often, FLEs’ efforts to please customers end up worsening their own well-being (e.g., Rupp et al. 2008).

In terms of withdrawal in the context of customer incivility, studies have shown that FLEs frequently engage in withdrawal behaviors following stressful customer encounters (e.g., Sliter, Sliter and Jex 2012). However, whether these behaviors actually benefit FLEs’ well-being in terms of enabling them to recover lost resources is still largely unknown. There is a need to advance knowledge beyond simply identifying and describing the types of strategies FLEs use in response to customer incivility. We need to better understand the impacts of these strategies, and

whether they are effective at alleviating (or conversely exacerbating) the problem. We argue that the potential replenishing function of short-term withdrawal behaviors at work may serve to counteract the depleting effects of customer incivility, making FLEs' service quality more consistent and more easily sustained (Sriram, Chintagunta, and Manchanda 2015). At a practical level, understanding more about the potential benefits of short-term withdrawal could also alter managers' as well as customers' generally negative attitudes towards FLEs engaging in these behaviors at work. Given the high turnover rates among FLEs (Hausknecht, Trevor, and Howard 2009), and given the high volatility and hostility that FLEs must increasingly contend with in the current turbulent service context, there is an urgent need to systematically investigate the effectiveness of a broad range of recovery strategies. Service organizations need to take an evidence-based approach rather than relying on implicitly held managerial assumptions about the seemingly 'negative' effects of short-term withdrawal strategies.

To investigate the potential resource-replenishing effect of FLEs' use of short-term withdrawal behaviors, we draw on COR theory (Hobfoll 1989) to develop our model and hypotheses on how short-term forms of withdrawal behaviors can have a replenishing function. According to COR theory, when people's resources are threatened with loss or have already been lost as a result of resource-depleting events, the recovery of the lost resources becomes a central motivating force (Hobfoll 1989; Hobfoll et al. 2018). Hence, in this study, we conceptualize customer incivility as instances of resource-depleting events (rude, impolite, or discourteous actions of customers) encountered by FLEs on a daily basis. In accordance with COR theory, FLEs' attempts to recover lost resources can be conceptualized as being driven by two distinct processes: protection or acquisition. The two are distinct strategies for recovering lost resources. Protection is a more conservative strategy of limiting resource expenditure by protecting and saving whatever resources are left, whereas acquisition is arguably more risky (but with the potential for greater gain), as it involves further resource investment by changing the behavior or

situation in some way to seek opportunities to gain new or additional resources. This theoretical distinction is important for our research as these two processes have differential implications in terms of their replenishing effectiveness.

Specifically, we use Hobfoll (1989)’s conceptualization of resource protection and resource acquisition processes to distinguish between two types of short-term withdrawal. On the one hand, FLEs can engage in ‘off-task’ withdrawal, in which they change the situation by temporarily removing themselves from the depleting service interaction to gain resource-replenishing opportunities elsewhere (e.g., retreating to the tearoom for a short break, Wang et al. 2011). On the other hand, FLEs can also engage in ‘on-task’ withdrawal by continuing to provide service but protecting their existing resources by markedly reducing effort during the service situation (Mohr and Bitner 1995; Shao and Skarlicki 2014). We argue that FLEs’ on-task withdrawal represents a resource protection strategy, in that it involves limiting resource expenditure by markedly reducing effort, but may not be effective in addressing, or may even accelerate, FLEs’ resource depletion. On the other hand, off-task withdrawal is a resource acquisition strategy, in that it involves changing the behavior or situation in some way to seek opportunities to gain new or additional resources to replenish depleted resources.

Our conceptual model is shown in Figure 1. We conducted two field studies in different service contexts to examine the utility of different forms of short-term withdrawal strategies to determine whether they differentially impact the effects of customer incivility on FLEs’ subsequent emotional exhaustion. We extend previous studies by examining withdrawal strategies not as outcomes of customer incivility, but rather as moderators, to investigate the *effectiveness* of these withdrawal strategies (i.e., do these behaviors work in terms of replenishing lost resources or do they make things worse?), which has received far less empirical attention. In Study 1, we investigated the potentially beneficial effects of short-term, off-task withdrawal on the within-person relationship between customer incivility events and emotional

exhaustion. We propose that off-task withdrawal is an effective strategy for replenishing FLEs' resources that are depleted by a customer incivility event. In Study 2, we extended Study 1 by investigating the replenishing effectiveness of both on-task and off-task withdrawal behavior. We propose that on-task withdrawal has a smaller replenishing function, and may even exacerbate emotional exhaustion, as a consequence of FLEs having to persist with effort (albeit at a lower level) in the face of customer incivility.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A Resource Perspective on Customer Incivility: Depletion and Recovery

Customer incivility is undoubtedly an unpleasant experience for FLEs, inducing negative feelings such as stress, anger, and frustration (Kern and Grandey 2009; Rupp and Spencer 2006). Customer incivility is an important area for research for service scholars because it undermines FLEs' well-being and service performance. Building on Hobfoll (1989)'s COR theory, we conceptualize FLEs' well-being as the dynamic fluctuations (as resources are depleted or replenished) in emotional exhaustion, defined as being emotionally tired, drowsy, or fatigued (Chan and Wan 2012). Previous research has established a strong negative association between FLEs' emotional exhaustion and their customer-oriented behaviors (Lages and Piercy 2012) as well as service delivery (Troughakos et al. 2008). Thus, FLEs' emotional exhaustion plays an important role in determining not only their own well-being and mood, but also their capacity to deliver service quality to subsequent customers (Chan and Wan 2012).

From a resource perspective, interacting with a misbehaving customer significantly drains FLEs' resources from what Hobfoll (1989) conceptualizes as a limited reservoir, due to the excessive cognitive (Rafaeli et al. 2012) and regulatory (Groth and Grandey 2012) effort they have to exert. This resource depletion, normally manifested as feelings of fatigue and emotional



exhaustion, severely hinders FLEs’ capacity to deliver satisfactory service (Crosno et al. 2009; Yoo and Arnold 2016). Previous research has supported this claim by demonstrating that long-term exposure to customer incivility is positively associated with FLEs’ emotional exhaustion (Baranik et al. 2017; Gong et al. 2014; Grandey, Dickter, and Sin 2004; Harris and Reynolds 2003). In addition, short-term customer incivility incidents have been shown to temporarily increase FLEs’ feelings of fatigue (Goldberg and Grandey 2007; Rafaeli et al. 2012).

COR theory suggests that resource recovery plays a key role in mitigating the negative impact of customer incivility. Recovery refers to a process during which individuals’ functional systems that have been called upon during a stressful experience return to their pre-stressor levels (Meijman and Mulder 1998). From a resource perspective, recovery refers to the process of gaining new resources and restoring lost ones (Sonnentag and Fritz 2007). Recovery has traditionally been argued to occur mainly outside the work environment and during non-work hours, such as at home (Sonnentag and Zijlstra 2006), during vacations (Etzion et al. 1998), or during scheduled breaks (Troughakos et al. 2014), during which time people accumulate enough additional resources to use during subsequent work. But these types of recovery activities provide little help in dealing with acute and unexpected resource-depleting events such as customer incivility. Many service organizations expect FLEs to deal with customers on a continuous basis, meaning that FLEs do not normally get opportunities to engage in recovery activities after encountering customer incivility. The lack of recovery opportunities could make the effect of customer incivility more lasting and enduring, damaging FLEs’ service performance with subsequent customers. For example, Wang et al. (2011) showed that incivility from one customer encountered by call center employees negatively impacted the service quality they delivered to subsequent customers that day. Similarly, both Groth and Grandey (2012) and Reynolds and Harris (2009) theorized about the possibility of spill-over effects, indicating that

FLEs who are exposed to dysfunctional customer behavior are likely to deliver a compromised service experience to proximate or subsequent customers.

### **Withdrawal after Resource Depletion**

With few or no opportunities to recover, individuals may initiate their own strategies in order to combat the negative effects of resource-depleting events. Research on customer incivility has examined various strategies employees tend to use when encountering customer incivility. In Table 1, we provide a brief summary of studies that have examined possible consequences of customer incivility. While various behaviors have been documented as outcomes, less attention has been paid to exploring whether withdrawal behaviors have a recovery function (i.e., examining the moderating effect). Indeed, few studies have compared different short-term withdrawal strategies in order to investigate their relative effectiveness in replenishing resources. In this research, we extend the current literature by evaluating employees' use of different withdrawal behaviors on recovery.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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One way FLEs might deal with customer incivility events, as shown in Table 1, is to withdraw. Withdrawal behavior at work is defined as “any purposeful behavior by which an employee endeavors to avoid work or a reduction in an employee’s socio-psychological attraction to or interest in the work or the organization” (Sliter et al. 2012, p. 123). Empirically, numerous studies have supported this notion by showing FLEs’ tendency to withdraw after they encounter customer incivility (Chi et al. 2018; Sliter et al. 2012; Van Jaarsveld et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2011), making withdrawal the ‘default’ reaction for many FLEs in response to customer incivility. However, employees’ natural reactions to resource-depleting events do not always serve recovery purposes, and some behaviors may even backfire and aggravate the damage (e.g. Brown, Westbrook, and Challagalla 2005). Given the range of ways FLEs can withdraw at work, it is not entirely clear whether and which withdrawal strategies benefit FLEs in helping them to

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3 actually recover. To explore this question, we develop hypotheses about the effectiveness of  
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5 different forms of short-term withdrawal strategies, using COR theory.  
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8       According to Hobfoll (1989), people are motivated to acquire, protect, and retain resources  
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10 to deal with stressful situations as they arise. More specifically, people tend to exhibit either or  
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12 both of two tendencies when encountering resource-depleting events such as customer incivility:  
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14 (1) the resource acquisition tendency suggests that people are motivated to invest their remaining  
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16 resources into activities that are seen as instrumental to acquiring additional resources, which can  
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18 be used to buffer the effect of stressful events; and (2) the resource protection tendency suggests  
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20 that people exhibit less willingness to spend additional time and energy engaging in any extra  
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22 activities, in order to save their remaining resources. While people normally exhibit both  
23  
24 tendencies after resource depletion, the specific strategies they use can be mapped as serving  
25  
26 either acquisition or protection purposes (Ng and Feldman 2012).  
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30       It is important to differentiate between acquisition and protection strategies, as they have  
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32 different implications for recovery effectiveness. As Hobfoll claimed, “people must invest  
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34 resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses and gain resources”  
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36 (2001, p. 349). People who are unwilling to spend resources, or who have few remaining  
37  
38 resources to allocate, would likely face a loss spiral in which initial resource-depleting events  
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40 induce similar events. In other words, acquisition strategies, which involve the investment of  
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42 existing resources to pursue more resources, are likely to beget resource replenishment. By  
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44 investing their remaining resources, people temporarily change a resource-threatening  
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46 environment into a situation where they are better positioned to gain more resources. For  
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48 example, when employees feel resource-depleted, they engage in more citizenship behaviors for  
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50 their colleagues, creating an environment in which they are more likely to gain social support  
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52 (Halbesleben and Wheeler 2011).  
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Resource protection, on the other hand, does not involve a proactive search for new resources. People who engage in resource protection strategies are motivated by the need to preserve existing resources and try to maintain the minimum level of resource expenditure. Such defensive tactics, however, do not enable individuals to accrue resources. Ironically, resource protection strategies can backfire and invite more resource-depleting events. For example, Ng and Feldman (2012) found that employees' withholding of voice, as a resource protection strategy, was dysfunctional as a coping strategy. Employees who withhold opportunities to use their voice may be seen by managers as passive and poor performers, thus being assigned fewer interesting tasks and having fewer opportunities to be promoted.

Consequently, based on COR theory, whether withdrawal can serve a replenishing function or not depends on whether such behavior represents an acquisition or a protection strategy. We believe the difference between acquisition and protection may be even more pronounced in the context of customer incivility incidents, as employees normally do not get instantaneous resources from the external environment (e.g., co-workers' and manager's support may not always be available when customer incivility happens), and they therefore need to search proactively for resources themselves. In the following sections, we examine the replenishing role of two types of short-term withdrawal strategies at work: (1) off-task withdrawal as a type of resource acquisition strategy and (2) on-task withdrawal as a type of resource protection strategy.

### **The Potential Replenishing Effects of Short-Term Off-Task Withdrawal**

Off-task withdrawal in a service context represents FLEs' discretionary efforts to remove themselves temporarily from the service situation and avoid further interactions with customers. While such behaviors are strictly forbidden in many service organizations (e.g., the 'always on' policy), in organizations where service delivery is less structured or nonroutine or requires innovation and creativity (Coelho and Augusto 2010) FLEs are able to exercise some degree of autonomy, allowing them to implement withdrawal behaviors while on the job. FLEs often want

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3 to avoid further customer interactions after encountering customer incivility. For example,  
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5 Bailey and McCollough (2000) showed that service employees often temporarily leave the  
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7 customer service work site, such as by going outside and taking a short break, after dealing with  
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9 a misbehaving customer. Similarly, Wang and colleagues (2011) showed that call center  
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11 employees might purposefully disconnect a call or intentionally put a customer on hold for a  
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13 long period of time after being mistreated by the customer.  
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17 We argue that short-term, off-task withdrawal represents FLEs changing their situation and  
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19 behavior by moving away from the depleting situation and seeking opportunities to acquire and  
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21 recoup lost resources elsewhere. Off-task withdrawal is different from a scheduled break in that  
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23 the decision to withdraw is made based on each FLE's judgement of their own situation.  
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25 Voluntary off-task withdrawal means FLEs investing resources away from the resource-  
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27 depleting situation in order to recover. Not only do they need to spend time and effort identifying  
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29 an appropriate place that can insulate them from customers, but they also need to work more  
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31 intensively after returning to make up for the time they were away (Jett and George 2003). For  
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33 example, a call center employee who decides to take some time off-task may need to work faster  
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35 to meet their quota for the day. Thus, when FLEs engage in off-task withdrawal, they may  
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37 sacrifice resources from other areas to get an opportunity for immediate recovery.  
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43 Since FLEs actively search for recovery during off-task withdrawal, they are likely to be  
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45 mindful about what they do during the withdrawal time and engage in activities that can help  
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47 them recover while avoiding those that will not. For instance, during short-term off-task  
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49 withdrawal, FLEs might drink water or eat snacks, helping alleviate their exhaustion from  
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51 customer incivility (Sonnentag and Fritz 2007). There is evidence that intakes, such as minerals  
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53 and glucose, help to recharge lost energy and aid recovery from temporary emotional exhaustion  
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55 (Gailliot et al. 2007). In addition, employees may engage in casual social activities (e.g., chatting  
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57 to others) if they do not expect to interact with customers. Where FLEs work in small groups,  
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temporarily withdrawing from service tasks can allow them to have more relaxing conversations, rather than ruminate about a customer incivility event (Kim et al. 2017; Wang et al. 2013).

We argue that short-term, off-task withdrawal should serve a replenishing function, as avoiding interaction with other customers provides an opportunity for FLEs to regain their equilibrium and resources. In this paper, we focus on FLEs' short-term off-task withdrawal following specific incidents of customer incivility, rather than long-term withdrawal from work such as absenteeism and turnover (e.g., Sliter et al. 2012; Van Jaarsveld et al. 2019). Previous research suggests that chronic or permanent removal or absence from work may have negative consequences not necessarily seen in more short-term, episodic withdrawal behaviors. For example, employees who regularly withdraw from their work might be allocated fewer interesting tasks and given less support by supervisors and co-workers (Zapf, Dormann, and Frese 1996). COR theory also suggests that employees' excessive pursuit of resource recovery may hinder their performance (Halbesleben et al. 2014). However, these consequences should only emerge if employees' withdrawal from the task is perceived by others as illegitimate and accumulates over a longer time. In the short term, episodic off-task withdrawal is unlikely to have these negative consequences. Supervisors and co-workers may even view temporary off-task withdrawal as well-justified if an FLE has had an abusive customer.

*Hypothesis 1: The relationship between customer incivility incidents and emotional exhaustion is weakened when FLEs engage in short-term, off-task withdrawal.*

### **The Potential Depleting Effects of Short-Term On-Task Withdrawal**

In addition to off-task withdrawal, FLEs may also choose on-task withdrawal behaviors after encountering customer incivility, meaning that they continue to work and serve customers but significantly reduce their effort. In many contexts, FLEs may feel compelled to work, even after being mistreated by a customer (e.g., when the store is busy or when taking a break is prohibited). In such cases, they may withdraw more covertly by reducing effort they put into

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3 serving customers. For example, Chi et al. (2018) suggested that FLEs had a tendency to reduce  
4 effort after encountering customer incivility.  
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8 We believe such on-task withdrawal, manifested as reducing effort during the service  
9 process, represents a resource protection strategy that is unlikely to be effective in replenishing  
10 resources. Although reducing effort helps to conserve energy, FLEs are still in the presence of  
11 customers and therefore remain in a potentially stressful environment. It is unlikely that they can  
12 engage in recovery activities, such as drinking water, eating a snack, or chatting casually to  
13 colleagues, while they are still serving customers, as these behaviors are normally considered  
14 unprofessional (and some service organizations explicitly forbid them). Research into the  
15 broader workplace context has shown that people who continue to work despite being tired  
16 experience more fatigue and exhaustion as a result, and this effect does not get weaker even if  
17 people put less effort into their work (Johns 2010).  
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31 We propose that the strategy of on-task withdrawal may even backfire and aggravate FLEs'  
32 feelings of emotional exhaustion after customer incivility. On-task withdrawal means FLEs put  
33 less effort into their work, which is generally associated with poorer service quality and can  
34 sometimes cause service failure (Mohr and Bitner 1995). For example, if nurses put less effort  
35 into their work, they are likely to provide lower-quality patient care and make errors. Therefore,  
36 FLEs who put less effort into their work may generate more dissatisfaction and even incivility  
37 from other customers. Their level of emotional exhaustion may therefore be aggravated due to  
38 the extra resources they then need to invest to deal with these additional dissatisfied customers.  
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40 Indeed, evidence shows that poor service delivery can be the source of incivility in service  
41 interactions and creates a resource-loss spiral, in which dysfunctional coping in response to  
42 customer incivility generates more incivility (Groth and Grandey 2012). Thus, we propose:  
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56 *Hypothesis 2: The relationship between customer incivility incidents and FLEs' emotional*  
57 *exhaustion is stronger when FLEs engage in on-task withdrawal.*  
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Below, we describe two experience-sampling field studies in different service contexts to examine the utility of short-term withdrawal strategies in mitigating the impact of customer incivility on FLEs' emotional exhaustion. In Study 1, we investigated a sample of parking officers, who manage the use of public parking and issue infringement notices to drivers who violate parking or road safety rules. Based on interviews conducted before the study, we found that parking officers frequently engage in short-term, off-task withdrawal behaviors (e.g., officers frequently discussed taking a short 'breather' at the local park). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, we expected this off-task withdrawal to be an effective strategy for replenishing parking officers' resources, depleted by customer incivility events. In Study 2 in a sample of nurses in a large children's hospital, we first examined the generalizability of Study 1's findings by testing the replenishing effects of off-task withdrawal. We also extended Study 1 by comparing on-task withdrawal behavior (i.e., markedly reducing effort during service delivery) with off-task withdrawal to test whether on-task withdrawal has less replenishing function and may even exacerbate emotional exhaustion as a result of FLEs having to persist with effort in the face of customer incivility.

## STUDY 1

### Sample and Procedure

In Study 1, we investigate an understudied group of service employees—parking officers. In Australia, parking officers are employed by local government or city councils to enforce parking regulations. In addition to issuing fines for parking violations, they perform a range of other core services, such as providing parking advice and education, giving directions, and representing the council in their interactions with customers (i.e., members of the public)<sup>1</sup>. In serving the community and being the 'face' of the council, parking officers are required to provide a positive service experience for their customers and for the broader community. However, parking officers are not 'typical' service providers. As their service role involves enforcing regulations, imposing



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finest, and giving warnings, they perform what Singh and Duque (2012) described as ‘negative service’, in which customers experience stress and frustration during the service process. Although parking officers are not typical service providers, the service they perform provides an ideal context for studying customer incivility as they tend to encounter it on a daily basis. Indeed, they are often viewed by members of the public as an annoyance and characterized as villains and they frequently encounter verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse and mistreatment.

In the first stage of this research, to gain a better understanding of the daily experiences of parking officers, we conducted several one-to-one interviews and focus groups to identify parking officers’ typical withdrawal behaviors at work. We also shadowed several parking officers while they were working and witnessed first-hand their on-the-job experience. A common theme that emerged from the interviews and observations was that parking officers frequently used task avoidance as a temporary off-task withdrawal strategy. Parking officers have some autonomy in determining their patrol routes. Thus, they will occasionally walk to non-parking areas to avoid having to issue tickets and interact with motorists. For example, one parking officer described in our interview how he would take a short break and seek solace in the local park after several hours of work. Furthermore, in many instances we found that parking officers choose not to issue a ticket when they should. For example, several of the parking officers we interviewed mentioned that they intentionally avoided customers they deemed too difficult to interact with. Thus, in Study 1, we measured parking officers’ temporary job avoidance to capture their off-task withdrawal behaviors.

All parking officers employed by two large Australian metropolitan councils were invited to participate in a two-phase study. In phase one, they were asked to complete a short paper-and-pencil survey containing demographic measures. In phase two of the study, experience-sampling data were obtained via an electronic survey which, with permission from the councils, was programmed into the personal digital assistants (PDAs) the parking officers used to issue parking

1 tickets. All parking officers are provided with their own council-issued PDAs, which they carry  
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6 with them at all times and which record all parking infringements. The experience-sampling  
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8 period lasted eight consecutive days, during which participants were asked to complete a survey  
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10 four times per day. The PDAs were programmed to prompt participants, via auditory and visual  
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12 signals, to complete the survey at various points during the working day. We programmed the  
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14 first signal of the day to occur approximately one hour into the shift. The last signal occurred  
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16 approximately one hour before the end of the shift, and the two remaining signals occurred at  
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18 intervals of approximately two to three hours. The intervals were modified to accommodate each  
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20 participant's working hours. A pseudorandom technique (randomizing with restrictions) was  
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22 used to program the signals roughly within these time periods. Because the participants would  
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24 have to stop what they were doing to complete the PDA survey, they were allowed to 'snooze'  
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26 (i.e., delay) the alarm signal for fifteen minutes, as required by their working conditions. All  
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28 survey entries were time-stamped to enable verification that the participants had completed the  
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30 surveys within the allowable timeframe. On each survey occasion, the participants gave ratings  
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32 for the time period since the last survey (or, in the case of the first survey, since the beginning of  
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34 the workday). The rating process took approximately two to three minutes to complete.  
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### 40 **Participants**

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42 A total of 48 parking officers volunteered for the study (96% response rate) and  
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44 completed the initial, one-off survey. Six participants were not included in the final sample  
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46 because they did not participate in the experience-sampling phase and/or had missing data for a  
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48 variety of reasons (illness, irregular work patterns, etc.). The final sample consisted of 42 parking  
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50 officers with matched demographic and experience-sampling data. The majority of the  
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52 participants were male (83%) and the average age was 45.09 years ( $SD = 11.99$  years). The  
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54 average job tenure was 5.34 years ( $SD = 3.19$  years) and the average weekly working hours  
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56 (including overtime) were 46.36 hours ( $SD = 17.50$  hours).  
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As an incentive for completing the research study, the participants were offered gift vouchers redeemable at local retail stores. To further encourage participation and reduce response fatigue, on the fourth day of the experience-sampling period, the participants received a text message encouraging completion of the within-day surveys. In total, 1,254 surveys were completed across the 42 participants, with each participant completing an average of 29.86 surveys. To capture the parking officers’ feelings of emotional exhaustion and their initiation of short-term withdrawal behaviors after encountering customer incivility, we estimated lagged effects within the workday, meaning that we paired customer incivility data measured at a particular time point with off-task withdrawal and emotional exhaustion data from a lagged time point. Thus, the maximum number of paired cases for each participant on each day was three. This process resulted in a total of 876 paired cases, with each participant providing 20.86 paired cases on average.

Measures

Due to extreme time constraints imposed by the experience-sampling design, we measured most of our constructs using short forms of measurement comprising one or two items. This reduces time away from the job and mental fatigue for participants completing surveys and is widely used and accepted in the field for studies with similar experience-sampling designs (Beal 2015). Specifically, *customer incivility* was measured using the same measurement as Grandey, Kern, and Frone (2007) for workplace abuse. *Emotional exhaustion* was measured with two items from Totterdell and Holman (2003). *Off-task withdrawal* was measured using one item from Miner, Glomb, and Hulin (2005)’s measurement of temporary job withdrawal or avoidance. We include details of all our measurements in the Appendix.

In order to exclude possible confounds, we controlled for factors that might influence employees’ temporary level of emotional exhaustion. At the incident level, we controlled for the number of customers parking officers had interacted with, by asking “Since the last reminder,

how many customers did you talk to". We also controlled for time of measurement within the day as individuals' level of emotional exhaustion might increase naturally as they move towards the end of their workday. Also, we controlled for baseline emotional exhaustion (emotional exhaustion measured at time  $t$ ) when predicting emotional exhaustion measured at time  $t+1$ , in order to strengthen causal inference. At the between-person level, we controlled for typical demographic information used in well-being studies, including age, tenure, and average working hours. In addition, following Hofmann and Gavin (1998), we included the means of all within-person predictors (i.e. customer incivility, off-task withdrawal) in our between-person model.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all study variables are presented in Table 2. Given the hierarchical nature of our data, we used multilevel modeling to test all of our hypotheses. More specifically, to balance theoretical nuance and model parsimony, we specified all the hypothesized effects as random (i.e. customer incivility—emotional exhaustion, off-task withdrawal—emotional exhaustion, and the moderating effect). That is, all within-person random slopes were allowed to vary at the between-person level. All the control effects were specified as fixed<sup>2</sup>. We centered all our within-person predictors on their personal means, rather than their general means. Adopting this method of centering ensures that within-individual effects are not confounded by differences between study participants (Dimotakis, Scott, and Koopman 2011; Preacher, Zhang, and Zyphur 2016).

Before testing our hypotheses, we ran null models to examine the within- and between-person variance of all the experience sampling variables. As shown in Table 2, our dependent variable (i.e., emotional exhaustion) exhibits significant amounts of variance at the between-person level (between SD = 1.18,  $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, the within-person variance of this variable accounts for a significant proportion of its total variance (within SD = 0.58, % within variance = 19.68%). Thus, the use of hierarchical linear modeling to test our model is justified<sup>3</sup>.

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Insert Table 2 here  
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In order to test Hypothesis 1, we formed interaction terms between time-t customer incivility and time-(t+1) off-task withdrawal. Following Aguinis, Gottfredson, and Culpepper (2013)’s suggestion, we multiplied group-mean-centered variables (i.e., variables centered based on personal means). As shown in Table 3, the interaction between customer incivility and off-task withdrawal has a significant negative effect on emotional exhaustion ( $b = -0.08, p < 0.01$ ). Based on Bauer and Curran (2005)’s procedure, we show these interaction effects in Figure 2. A simple slope test reveals that the effect of customer incivility on emotional exhaustion is significant and positive when off-task withdrawal is low (simple slope = 0.07,  $z = 4.11, p < 0.01$ ) and insignificant when off-task withdrawal is high (simple slope = -0.02,  $z = -0.44, n.s.$ )<sup>4</sup>. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

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Insert Table 3 and Figure 2 here  
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**Discussion of Study 1**

While Study 1 offers support for the replenishing function of off-task withdrawal, the study has several limitations. First, parking officers represent a non-typical service occupation. Although the unique nature of their work provides a useful context for studying incidents of customer incivility, it also raises questions about the generalizability of our findings to other service jobs. Second, the study does not show whether a contrasting form of short-term withdrawal, such as on-task withdrawal, can serve the same replenishing function as off-task withdrawal. This is particularly crucial as previous studies have grouped on-task and off-task withdrawal together to form a higher-order withdrawal behavior construct (e.g., Chi et al. 2018). However, as we theorized earlier, on-task withdrawal is a resource protection rather than an acquisition strategy by employees and may therefore not serve a similar replenishing function.

To address these limitations, we conducted a second study to examine the generalizability of Study 1's findings to other service contexts and to extend Study 1 by comparing the replenishing functions of off-task and on-task withdrawal.

## STUDY 2

### Sample and Procedure

In Study 2, we drew on a sample of nurses working at a large teaching hospital in Australia. Nurses are often characterized as an example of society's service 'heroes' as the public perceives them to be motivated by a strong desire to help others rather than by money (Lee 2001). However, societal veneration of nurses does not protect them from patient or family incivility. Aggression and mistreatment from patients have been identified as the most significant contributors to nurses' long-term stress and burnout (Goussinsky and Livne 2016). In our interviews with nurses conducted before the study, they described their off-task withdrawal as taking a 'short break' or 'time out'. Hence, we focused on whether nurses feel less exhausted if they take a short break or time out after encountering patient or family incivility.

There are two important features distinguishing nurses from parking officers, which suggest vastly different experiences of customer incivility events. First, nurses and parking officers are governed by different emotional display rules, meaning they are expected to display distinctively different emotions when interacting with customers or patients. Wharton and Erickson (1993) made the distinction between integrative display rules, in which positive emotion is emphasized, and differentiating display rules, in which neutral and even negative emotion is encouraged. A similar distinction has been made by Singh and Duque (2012) regarding positive and negative service. Nurses provide medical care to vulnerable patients and are expected to show emotions such as care, empathy, and friendliness. This is in sharp contrast to parking officers, who are normally required to exhibit toughness and indifference towards their customers (i.e., infringers).

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Another distinctive feature of nurses compared to parking officers is their relative power vis-à-vis their customers. While parking officers can largely force infringers to accept the fines they choose to write, nurses more closely have a ‘typical’ service job, in which the customer holds more discretion in determining the content of service they receive. When conflict arises, customers (i.e., patients) can simply refuse to receive the treatment or opt for another service provider. In addition, unlike parking officers’, nurses’ performance evaluations depend significantly on how satisfied patients are with the treatment they receive (Berry and Bendapudi 2007). These differences suggest that nurses and parking officers may also have different experiences of customer incivility events.

Given these two important differences, the experience of emotional exhaustion as a result of customer incivility, as well as the replenishing effectiveness of withdrawal, may differ between nurses and parking officers. For example, Wharton and Erickson (1993) suggested that employees working in jobs governed by different display rules experience different levels of exhaustion as a result of interacting with customers. More specifically, integrative display rules put an additional burden on FLEs in coping with customer incivility by requiring them to stay calm and friendly, even when a patient is ‘misbehaving’ (Goldberg and Grandey 2007). In addition, while FLEs who perform a ‘negative service’ (i.e., causing distress in customers; Singh and Duque 2012) can use various tactics to minimize the extent or severity of incivility (e.g., parking officers can deter infringers’ uncivil behavior by threatening to increase fines), those who perform a more typical ‘positive’ service do not have that option and are often required to satisfy their customers’ unreasonable demands. Nurses provide a contrasting ‘positive’ service context in which to retest our hypothesis, allowing us to make stronger generalizability claims.

Senior nursing staff in a specialist metropolitan children’s hospital in Australia were invited to participate in this study. Similar to Study 1, Study 2 required participants to complete a paper-and-pencil survey containing demographic measures, followed by experience-sampling surveys



delivered electronically through i-pods with pre-programmed alarms. Each participant was given an i-pod and carried the device with them throughout the study period. The experience-sampling period occurred over two consecutive work weeks (10 working days), during which participants were asked to complete the survey three times per day. The reduced number of measurement points within the day (from four to three) reflected the number of patient or family encounters senior nurses typically engage in during a shift, in addition to reducing the time nurses would need to spend completing the surveys during their shifts. The total time for the study was increased to ten days (from eight) to ensure we had a similar number of lagged data points to Study 1. Each of the alarms was pre-programmed to reflect the shift pattern of the individual nurse and to prompt the nurse one hour into their shift, at approximately the mid-point, and one hour before the end of the shift. As in Study 1, the participants were advised that, if the alarm occurred during a patient interaction or at any other critical time, they could snooze the alarm for fifteen minutes, as required. All survey entries were time-stamped to enable verification that the participants had completed the surveys within a reasonable timeframe. On each survey occasion, the participants gave ratings for the time period since the last survey (or, in the case of the first survey, since the beginning of the workday). The rating process took two to three minutes.

As an incentive for completing the research study, the participants were offered a personalized feedback booklet (only available to individual participants), which gave them information about how their experiences compared to others in a similar role, and the overall sample. This feedback was discussed in workshops, and the organization provided an option for participants to engage in coaching sessions and to build their results into a personalized development and well-being plan. To further encourage participation and reduce response fatigue, each of the participants received a visit from a member of the research team to ensure there were no issues with the technology and to address any questions or concerns.



**Participants**

A total of 68 senior nurses volunteered to participate in the study (a response rate of 70%). These participants provide a total of 1,731 experience-sampling survey responses, resulting in a response rate of 85% (the maximum number of possible responses being 68 participants \* 10 days \* 3 times/day = 2,040 responses). Twelve participants were excluded because they failed to complete the paper survey. Thus, the final sample for Study 2 consisted of 56 senior nurses with matching demographic and experience-sampling data. The majority of the participants were female (94%) and the average age was 43.70 years (SD = 7.98 years). The average job tenure was 8.75 years (SD = 6.30 years) and average weekly working hours (including overtime) were 38.34 hours (SD = 14.50 hours). As in Study 1, we paired patient or family incivility data measured at one time point with withdrawal and emotional exhaustion data from the subsequent time point within the same day. This process resulted in a total of 804 paired cases, with each participant providing 14.36 paired cases on average.

**Measurement**

As in Study 1, we used short-format instruments to measure all episodic level variables. To maintain consistency between the two studies, *customer incivility* and *emotional exhaustion* were measured using the same items as in Study 1, with customer incivility adapted to the context (i.e., patient/family). *Off-task withdrawal* was measured using one item adapted from Hunter and Wu (2015)’s measurement of workday breaks. *On-task withdrawal* was measured by one item from Lehman and Simpson (1992)’s measurement of workplace withdrawal. Details of all the measurements are presented in the appendix. In addition, we used the same set of control variables as in Study 1. At the within-person level, we controlled for the number of patients the nurses had interacted with, time of measurement within the day, and baseline emotional exhaustion. At the between-person level, we controlled for age, tenure, average working hours, and the means of all within-person predictors.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 4. We first ran null models to examine the within- and between-person variance of our dependent variable. As shown in Table 4, emotional exhaustion exhibits significant amounts of variance at the between-person level (between SD = 0.59,  $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, the within-person variance of this variable accounts for a significant proportion of its total variance (within SD = 0.59, % within variance = 50.06%). Thus, the use of hierarchical linear modeling to test our model is justified.

In order to test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we formed interaction terms between time- $t$  customer incivility and the time- $(t+1)$  withdrawal behaviors (i.e., both off-task and on-task withdrawal). Using the same process as in Study 1, we group-mean-centered the variables to construct the interaction terms. As shown in Table 5, the interaction between customer incivility and off-task withdrawal has a significant negative effect on emotional exhaustion ( $b = -0.09$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and the interaction between customer incivility and on-task withdrawal has a significant positive effect on emotional exhaustion ( $b = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Based on Bauer and Curran (2005)'s procedure, we show these interaction effects in Figures 3 and 4. A simple slope test reveals that the effect of customer incivility on emotional exhaustion is significant and positive when off-task withdrawal is low (simple slope = 0.08,  $z = 3.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and significant and negative when off-task withdrawal is high (simple slope = -0.06,  $z = -2.30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (see Figure 3). On the other hand, the relationship between customer incivility and emotional exhaustion is significant and positive when on-task withdrawal is high (simple slope = 0.06,  $z = 2.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and non-significant when on-task withdrawal is low (simple slope = -0.03,  $z = -1.33$ , n.s. see Figure 4). Thus, both Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported in Study 2.

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Insert Tables 4 and 5 and Figures 3 and 4 here  
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## GENERAL DISCUSSION

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**Summary of Results and Theoretical Implications**

FLEs’ withdrawal behaviors are often deemed counterproductive by both managers and customers. However, not all withdrawal behaviors are the same; short-term withdrawal behaviors may serve a recovery function and thus benefit FLEs’ well-being and service performance. In this paper, we conducted two experience-sampling studies to examine whether different short-term withdrawal strategies alleviate or exacerbate the negative impact of incidental customer incivility on FLEs’ emotional exhaustion. The results from Study 1 confirm the replenishing function of short-term off-task withdrawal by showing that parking officers’ engagement in temporary job avoidance mitigates the lagged effect of customer incivility on the officers’ emotional exhaustion. Study 2 extends these results and highlights further complexity and nuance in the replenishing function of FLEs’ withdrawal behaviors. While off-task withdrawal is still found to mitigate the impact of customer incivility on nurses, on-task withdrawal, on the other hand, exacerbates the negative consequences.

Our paper contributes to the service literature by showing the potential benefit of FLEs’ short-term off-task withdrawal behavior for their well-being. Previous research has generally emphasized the importance of FLEs’ engagement at work in determining their well-being and positive service behaviors related to service quality and customer satisfaction (Bowen and Schneider 2014; Schneider, White, and Paul 1998). Such emphasis echoes research in general management, which suggests that employee engagement is vital for a company’s success (Rich, Lepine, and Crawford 2010). However, there is evidence suggesting negative consequences of over-engagement, with engagement beyond employees’ resource capacity potentially leading to exhaustion, burnout, and work–life conflict (Halbesleben, Harvey, and Bolino 2009; Kühnel, Sonnentag, and Westman 2009). Such over-engagement not only damages employees’ well-being but also reduces performance and productivity. Thus, as recovery research suggests, it is necessary for employees to occasionally detach from their work to maintain a healthy level of

engagement (Sonnentag and Fritz 2015). Our results confirm that withdrawal that allows FLEs to temporarily avoid further interaction with customers following customer incivility can have a replenishing function and mitigate the negative impact of customer incivility.

Furthermore, our results also suggest that the replenishing effectiveness is not universal across all withdrawal strategies. More covert, on-task withdrawal does not serve the same replenishing function as off-task withdrawal, and it may even exacerbate the negative consequences of customer incivility. Such nuances in the replenishing functions of different withdrawal behaviors call for the exploration of the underlying mechanisms accounting for these differences. As argued earlier, we believe the key mechanism to be whether the withdrawal behavior represents a resource acquisition or protection strategy. When FLEs engage in off-task withdrawal, they are proactively seeking opportunities for replenishment, and also avoiding subsequent customer interactions which might further drain their resources. On-task withdrawal, however, does not allow FLEs to alter their working environment, and is therefore more limited in its replenishing effectiveness and may even invite more depleting events.

In addition, the two studies in this paper contribute to research on customer incivility as well as the COR literature by offering extra insight into resource-related processes associated with incivility events. While previous research has focused on external factors that may endow or further drain FLEs' resources following incivility events, we focus on employees' own initiatives to acquire and replenish their own resources. Furthermore, while COR studies tend to focus on employees' various strategies for acquiring or protecting resources, less attention has been devoted to the relative effectiveness of these strategies (Halbesleben et al. 2014). Differentiation between resource acquisition and protection has been discussed in prior research (e.g., Ng and Feldman 2012), yet there is little empirical work on the issue. Consequently, we contribute to both the customer incivility and the COR literature by highlighting the role of employees' own initiatives to manage their own dynamic resources, as well as nuances in the

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effectiveness of resource acquisition versus protection strategies. Future research should examine how the external environment and employees’ proactive resource management work in tandem. For example, rather than directly providing FLEs with resources, some job features may indirectly mitigate the effect of customer incivility by giving FLEs more autonomy to manage their own resources and directing them towards more functional resource acquisition strategies.

Lastly, our results highlight the importance of future service research differentiating between constructs operationalized at different levels. The widespread use of aggregated measures in customer incivility studies, in which respondents report general, retrospective levels of customer incivility, does not take into account the way personal resources can vary over even short periods of time (Halbesleben et al. 2014). Koopmann et al. (2015)’s conceptual model suggested that customer incivility could represent different phenomena when conceptualized at different temporal levels (i.e., chronic versus in the moment). Therefore, findings derived from aggregated measures cannot automatically be equated with those from a momentary incident level (e.g., Yue, Wang, and Groth 2017). Thus, our research provides important evidence of the utility of examining momentary effects of negative workplace incidents such as customer incivility. In addition, withdrawal behaviors may invoke different resource-related mechanisms when conceptualized at different levels. For example, as Study 1’s results suggest, short-term off-task withdrawal such as temporary job avoidance benefits parking officers’ well-being after they encounter customer incivility. However, we do not expect that similar patterns would be observed at the between-person level, given that chronic job-avoidance behaviors over extended periods of time may have serious repercussions for employees’ job performance. While performance loss due to short-term, incident-specific withdrawal can more easily be compensated for by greater engagement and involvement afterwards, long-term off-task withdrawal would more likely result in reduced performance and/or job loss.

**Practical Implications**

FLEs' job pace is often determined by customer demands rather than by the FLEs' own preferences. FLEs normally have to deliver customer service, regardless of their level of exhaustion, to meet customer demand. While many service organizations provide fixed spaces and time (e.g., lunch breaks) for FLEs to recharge their energy, discretionary withdrawal outside such mandated times is normally discouraged or even forbidden. In the case of customer incivility, it is not uncommon for service organizations to expect FLEs to be ready for the next customer immediately after interacting with a misbehaving customer (Bailey and McCollough 2000). As our research suggests, continuing to work despite being emotionally exhausted may actually aggravate the effects of an incident of customer incivility. On the other hand, temporarily stepping away from a task may recharge energy levels and allow employees to better prepare themselves for subsequent work. We thus believe our results provide important implications for service organizations regarding their job and organizational design. FLEs may be reluctant to engage in discretionary withdrawal because organizations do not provide them with sufficient autonomy to do so, either implicitly or explicitly. For example, service organizations' excessive pursuit of the motto 'the customer is always king' has led to strict policy against FLEs' discretionary withdrawal, requiring them to always be available for their customers, even when feeling exhausted. However, not only does such a requirement impair employees' well-being but it also goes against the organization's interests. FLEs who are exhausted are less likely to provide high-quality customer service and thus may negatively impact the customer experience. Our results therefore highlight the benefits of service organizations granting FLEs more autonomy in scheduling their work. More autonomy would allow FLEs to adjust their work pace based on the immediate situation and would benefit both FLEs' well-being and customers' outcomes.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

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Although this paper makes an important contribution to the service literature by examining the replenishing potential of various short-term withdrawal behaviors, it has some limitations. First, in both of our studies we measured customer incivility using a single item, reflecting previous research’s conceptualization of the construct as unidimensional (Sliter, Sliter, and Jex 2012; Wang et al. 2011). However, recent evidence suggests that customer incivility can take different forms (e.g. Walker, Van Jaarsveld, and Skarlicki 2017) and may vary in terms of intensity and thus have varying impacts on FLEs. For example, Walker and colleagues (2017) made a distinction between targeted and non-targeted customer incivility and claimed that the two forms of incivility would induce different outcomes. In addition, using a single item might fail to capture FLEs’ nuanced appraisal of different incivility events, which could create significant variance in their experience of emotional exhaustion. For example, FLEs may experience different emotions, thus different levels of emotional exhaustion, when incivility is caused by their own service failure as opposed to customers’ bad temper. Due to our use of an intensive, repeated measurement method, we did not assess employees’ appraisal of the specific characteristics of the customer incivility events they experienced. Future research could take a more nuanced approach to examine the different characteristics of each customer incivility event.

Second, while we examined FLEs’ off-task withdrawal behaviors as moderators, we did not actually test the underlying mechanism responsible for the replenishing effect. The recovery literature has suggested numerous mechanisms through which employees’ lost resources could be recovered (nutrient intaking, Gailliot et al. 2007; relaxation, Sonnentag and Fritz 2007; positive emotion, Tice et al. 2007), and most of these mechanisms could account for the replenishing effect of off-task withdrawal. In our studies, we aimed to establish a framework that would be generalizable to a variety of service contexts. Therefore, we focused on a broader construct of withdrawal, rather than more specific recovery activities (given that employees in different occupations may engage in different recovery activities). However, pinpointing the



most effective recovery activities within certain contexts is also important as it can guide organizations' workplace and job design efforts to mitigate the negative impact of customer incivility. Consequently, future research should also pay attention to the specific recovery activities that are responsible for the replenishing effect of FLEs' job withdrawal.

Third, in both studies we focused on short-term fluctuation in FLEs' resources by testing within-person effects. However, aside from controlling for basic demographic variables, we did not take into account stable individual as well as contextual differences that could potentially moderate these within-individual relationships. FLEs with different personalities, value systems, and job attitudes may appraise customer incivility events differently, and experience different levels of emotional exhaustion as a result (e.g., Walker, Van Jaarsveld, and Skarlicki 2014). Furthermore, the replenishing effectiveness of withdrawal behaviors may be moderated by FLEs' specific working environment. For example, customer incivility sometimes occurs in front of multiple peer customers (Henkel et al. 2017). Thus, peer customers' reaction towards incivility may also shape FLEs' tendency to withdraw as well as influence replenishing effectiveness. Unfortunately, in both of our studies, the sample size at the between-person level was too low to give us sufficient power to detect any between-person effects. We hope that future research will examine the role of individual and contextual differences and test our model using a larger sample at the between-person level.

Lastly, most of our effect sizes are small, making it reasonable to question their practical value. However, as Gabriel et al. (2018) suggested, effect sizes in within-individual studies are expected to be small, given that the analysis eliminates a considerable proportion of variance of the measure (for Study 1, within-person variance accounted for 32% of the total variance, for Study 2, 50% of the total variance) and for emotional exhaustion, the effect controls for the level of exhaustion measured several hours previously. In addition, even if effect sizes in within-individual studies are small, this does not necessarily mean they are unimportant (Prentice and



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Miller 1992). Relatively small fluctuations within short periods of time, may accumulate and have consequences in the long term. For example, if FLEs engage in on-task withdrawal every time they encounter customer incivility, they are more likely to become trapped in a resource-loss spiral, which may cause burnout in the long run (Groth and Grandey 2012).

In conclusion, by comparing and highlighting important nuances in the recovery function of two different types of short-term withdrawal behaviors, we offer important theoretical and practical implications for service organizations on managing customer incivility as well as FLEs’ well-being. We highlight, in particular, the important role of FLEs as active agents in managing their own fluctuating resources following customer incivility. Given the high turnover rates in the service industry, particularly among FLEs (Hausknecht, Trevor, and Howard 2009), there is immense practical value in investigating the effectiveness of a broad range of strategies FLEs can use to replenish themselves and make their service role more sustainable.

## Notes

1. Both councils included in this study referred to all members of the public as ‘customers’ in their organizational communications. Thus, we used the term ‘customers’ throughout Study 1 as well as in our survey items, where relevant.
2. We also ran our model with all the effects specified as random, or all the effects specified as fixed. The significance of our results did not change as a result of using these different specifications.
3. Experience-sampling studies, which normally focus on within-person variances, tend to report the *proportion of within-person variance* (PWV), rather than the intraclass correlation coefficient, to justify the use of hierarchical modeling (Podsakoff et al. 2019).
4. As we controlled for time t emotional exhaustion, the slope plotted in the interaction graph should be interpreted as CHANGE in emotional exhaustion from time t to time t+1 as a result of customer incivility\*off-task withdrawal interaction.

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APPENDIX

*Customer Incivility (Study 1 and Study 2):*

Since the last reminder, how many/to what extent do<sup>1</sup> customers have acted abusively towards you (e.g., shouted at, threatened, insulted, sworn at you, etc.)?

*Emotional Exhaustion (Study 1 and Study 2):*

At this moment, to what extent do you feel emotionally drained? (1: not at all—5: very large extent)

At this moment, to what extent do you feel emotionally exhausted? (1: not at all—5: very large extent)

*Off-task Withdrawal (Study 1):*

Since the last reminder, how often have you done something to avoid your work tasks? (1: not at all—5: very often)

*Off-task Withdrawal (Study 2):*

Since the last reminder, to what extent have you tried to take personal time out (e.g., a break)? (1: not at all—5: very large extent)

*On-task Withdrawal (Study 2):*

Since the last reminder, to what extent have you put less effort into your job than you should have? (1: not at all—5: very large extent)

<sup>1</sup> In Study 1, we asked participants to indicate the number of customer incivility incidents. In Study 2, they were asked to answer the frequency of customer incivility on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very often).



Table 1: Summary of Studies on Consequences for FLEs of Encountering Customer Incivility

Study	Empirical Analysis	Study Sample	Temporal Context	Behavioral Outcome	Psychological Outcome	Moderator
Baranik et al. (2017)	Survey	Call center service representatives	Long term	Customer-directed sabotage; Supervisor-rated performance	Emotional exhaustion; Well-being	
Chi, Tsai, and Tseng (2013)	Survey	Hairstylists and managers	Long term	Service sabotage behaviors	Hostility	Positive and negative group affective tone
Chi, Yang, and Lin (2018)	Survey	Frontline service employees from various industries	Short term/daily	On and off-task withdrawal	Negative emotion	Core self-evaluations;
Dallimore, Sparks, and Butcher (2007)	Experimental	Volunteer students enrolled in business, psychology, or engineering programs	Short term	Displayed negative affect	Experienced negative affect	Service training
Dormann and Zapf (2004)	Survey	Flight attendants, travel agency employees, and sales clerks in shoe stores	Long term		Emotional exhaustion; Depersonalization; Personal accomplishment	Customer's gender; FLE's gender
Dudenhöffer and Dormann (2013)	Survey	Employees of public service organizations	Short term/daily and weekly		Experienced negative affect	
Gettman and Gelfand (2007)	Survey	Employees in a large mid-Atlantic grocery store chain	Long term	On and off-task withdrawal; Affective commitment; Turnover intentions	Job satisfaction; Distress; Health satisfaction	
Giumetti et al. (2013)	Experimental	Undergraduate students	Short term	Task performance; Task engagement	Negative affect; Energy	
Goldberg and Grandey (2007)	Experimental	Undergraduate students	Short term	Task performance; Emotional labor	Emotional exhaustion	Display rule
Goussinsky (2011)	Survey	Call center employees	Long term		Job-induced tension	Positive and negative affectivity
Grandey, Dickter, and Sin (2004)	Survey	Call center employees	Long term	Absence	Emotional exhaustion	
Ho and Gupta (2014)	Survey	All customer-contact employees across various functions from two luxury hotels		Counterproductive workplace behaviors		Self-efficacy; Social support from co-workers and supervisors
Kern and Grandey (2009)	Survey	Employees from one store of a national retail company	Long term		Stress; Emotional exhaustion	Racial identity
Liu, Kwan, and Chiu (2013)	Survey	Frontline employees in restaurants	Long term	Service performance		Traditionality
Rafaeli et al. (2012)	Experimental	Students	Short term	Cognitive performance; Task performance		Cognitive ability; Perspective taking; Customer status



Table 1: Summary of Studies on Consequences for FLEs of Encountering Customer Incivility

Study	Empirical Analysis	Study Sample	Temporal Context	Behavioral Outcome	Psychological Outcome	Moderator
Rupp et al. (2008)	Survey	Employees of a medium-sized bank	Long term	Surface acting	Anger	Perspective taking
Rupp and Spencer (2006)	Experimental	College students	Short term	Emotional labor	Anger; Happiness	
Shao and Skarlicki (2014)	Survey	Frontline employees working in two hotels	Long term	Sabotage behavior; Citizenship behavior		Individualism; Collectivism
Skarlicki et al. (2016)	Survey	Customer service representatives in a call center	Long term	Sabotage behavior		Moral identity
Skarlicki, Van Jaarsveld, and Walker (2008)	Survey	Customer service representatives in a call center	Long term	Sabotage behavior; Job performance		Moral identity
Sliter et al. (2011)	Survey	Call center employees from a mid-sized bank	Long term	Task performance	Burnout	Trait anger
Sliter, Sliter, and Jex (2012)	Survey	Employees of a mid-sized bank	Long term	Absenteeism; Sales performance		Co-worker incivility
Song et al. (2018)	Survey	Call center employees from a large bank	Short term/daily	Rumination; Maladaptive shopping	Negative mood	
Van Jaarsveld, Walker, and Skarlicki (2010)	Survey	Customer service representatives employed in a call center	Long term	Incivility towards co-workers	Emotional exhaustion	
Volmer et al. (2012)	Survey	Employees from civil service agencies	Short term/daily	Negative work reflection	Negative affect	
Walker, Van Jaarsveld, and Skarlicki (2014)	Survey	Insurance customer service employees	Short term/daily	Sabotage behavior		Negative affectivity
Walker, Van Jaarsveld, and Skarlicki (2017)	Critical incident	Interactions between an insurance company's customers and employees of a contact center	Short term	Incivility towards co-workers		Customer's positive emotion words
Wang et al. (2011)	Survey	Call center employees	Short term/daily	Sabotage behavior		Supervisor support; Negative affectivity; Self-efficacy
Yang and Diefendorff (2009)	Survey	Employees working full time while enrolled in evening courses at universities	Short term/daily	Counterproductive workplace behavior	Negative emotions	Negative affectivity; Conscientiousness; Agreeableness
Yue, Wang, and Groth (2017)	Survey	Brand representatives working for a digital appliance retailer	Short term/daily	Citizenship behavior	Negative mood	Customer orientation
Zhan, Wang, and Shi (2016)	Survey	Customer representatives of a call center	Short term/daily		Emotional exhaustion; Negative mood	

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of Study 1

	Mean	Within SD	Between SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	45.13	-	11.54	-	.40**	.10	.23	-.20	-.03	-.12	-.05	-.02
2. Tenure	4.96	-	3.13		-	.08	.03	-.16	-.06	.03	-.08	-.06
3. Working Hours	47.84	-	18.64			-	-.01	-.03	-.13	-.00	.07	-.11
4. Measurement Time (time t)	2.48	1.35	0.20**				-	.13	.19	.05	-.06	.19
5. Number of Customers (time t+1)	2.62	2.36	2.69**				.02	-	.20	.64**	.38*	.21
6. Emotional Exhaustion (time t)	2.22	0.56	1.17**				.17**	-.03	(.92)	.37*	.30*	.97**
7. Customer Incivility (time t)	0.51	0.88	0.82**				-.03	.09**	.10**	-	.40**	.38*
8. Emotional Exhaustion (time t+1)	2.22	0.58	1.18**				.12**	.05	.41**	.07*	(.92)	.32*
9. Off-task Withdrawal (time t+1)	1.62	0.61	0.76**				.02**	.01	.03	-.01	.12	-

*Note.* *Between SD* means between-person standard deviation of each variable; *Within SD* means within-person standard deviation of each variable; Correlation coefficients above the main diagonal reflect correlations at between-person level, whereas coefficients below the main diagonal reflect correlations at the within-person level. Numbers on the main diagonal reflect reliability of the measurement, calculated as the Spearman-Brown coefficient between two items composing the variable.

. $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

Table 3: Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Study 1

	Emotional Exhaustion (time t+1)	Emotional Exhaustion (time t+1)
<b><i>Within-Person Fixed Effect</i></b>		
Number of Customers (time t+1)	0.03 (0.01)*	0.03 (0.01)*
Measurement Time (time t)	0.05 (0.02)*	0.04 (0.02)
Emotional Exhaustion (time t)	0.30 (0.04)***	0.29 (0.05)***
<b><i>Within-Person Random Effect</i></b>		
Customer Incivility (time t)	0.01 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
Off-task Withdrawal (time t+1)		0.03 (0.04)
Customer Incivility * Off-task Withdrawal		-0.08 (0.03)**
<b><i>Between-Person Effect</i></b>		
Age	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Tenure	0.03 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.06)
Working Hours	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Average Customer Incivility		0.36 (0.10)**
Average Off-task Withdrawal		0.56 (0.13)***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed).

Table 4: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Study 2

	Mean	Within SD	Between SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	43.70		7.98	-	.47**	-.16	-.03	.13	.00	-.04	-.06	.06
2. Tenure	8.75		6.30		-	-.15	-.05	.00	.01	-.05	-.07	-.01
3. Working Hours	38.34		14.53			-	.01	.07	.18	.02	-.03	-.10
4. Emotional Exhaustion (time t)	1.65	0.59	0.59**				(.73)	.26*	.62**	.98**	-.01	.12**
5. Number of Customers (time t+1)	2.48	1.08	0.95**				.04	-	.28*	.26*	.20	.07
6. Customer Incivility (time t)	1.36	0.68	0.45**				.31**	.03	-	.62**	.39**	.47**
7. Emotional Exhaustion (time t+1)	1.65	0.59	0.59**				.51**	.10**	.19**	(.73)	.34**	.52**
8. Off-task Withdrawal (time t+1)	1.78	0.77	0.48**				-.00	-.05	-.06	-.01	-	.69**
9. On-task Withdrawal (time t+1)	1.41	0.54	0.54**				.14**	-.05	-.01	.13**	.28**	-

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

Table 5: Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Study 2

	Emotional Exhaustion (time t+1)	Emotional Exhaustion (time t+1)
<b><i>Within-Person Fixed Effect</i></b>		
Measurement Time	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Number of Customers (time t+1)	0.05 (0.02)*	0.06 (0.02)**
Emotional Exhaustion (time t)	0.45 (0.05)***	0.41 (0.05)***
<b><i>Within-Person Random Effect</i></b>		
Customer Incivility (time t)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Off-task Withdrawal (time t+1)		-0.00 (0.03)
On-task Withdrawal (time t+1)		0.05 (0.04)
Customer Incivility * Off-task Withdrawal		-0.09 (0.03)**
Customer Incivility * On-task Withdrawal		0.09 (0.04)**
<b><i>Between-Person Effect</i></b>		
Age	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)
Tenure	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Working Hours	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Average Customer Incivility	0.80 (0.09)***	0.64 (0.13)***
Average Off-task Withdrawal		0.02 (0.13)
Average On-task Withdrawal		0.26 (0.10)**

Note. \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001 (two-tailed).

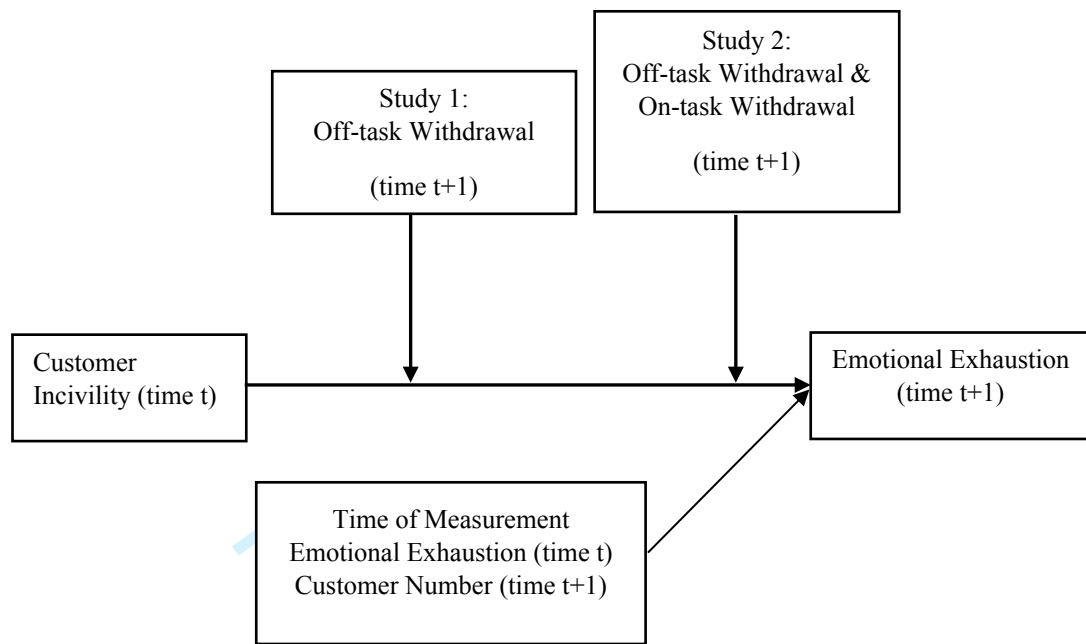


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

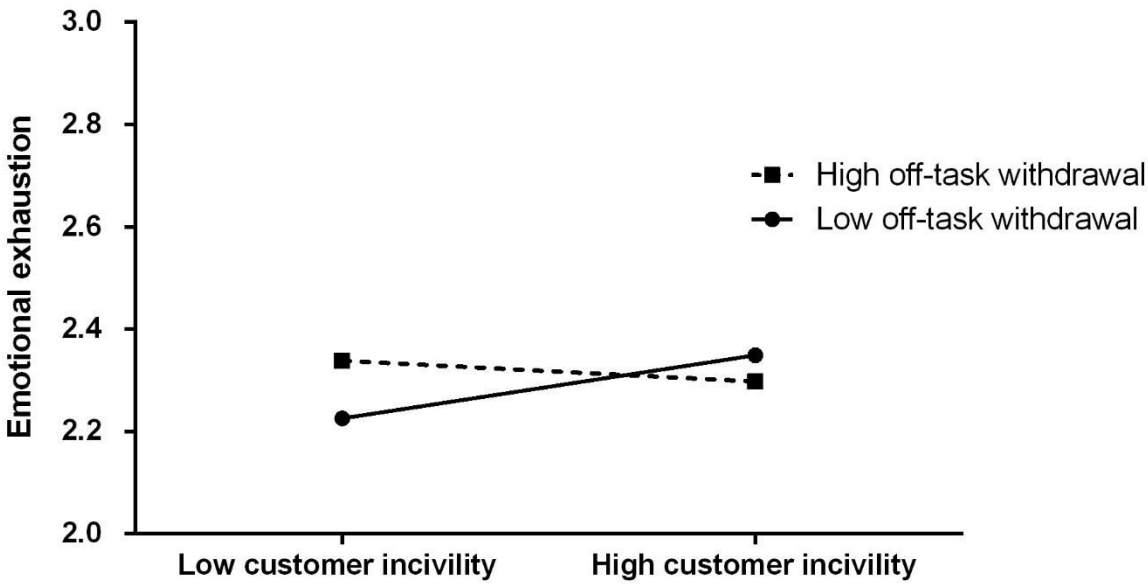


Figure 2: The Interaction Effect between Customer Incivility and Off-task Withdrawal on Emotional Exhaustion (Study 1)

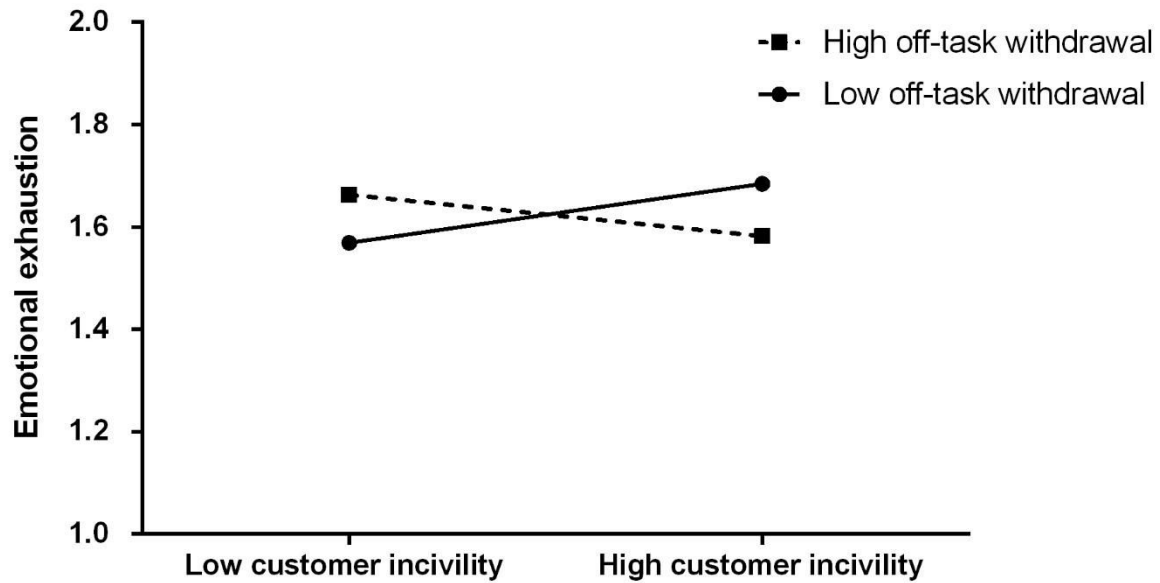


Figure 3: The Interaction Effect between Customer Incivility and Off-task Withdrawal on Emotional Exhaustion (Study 2)

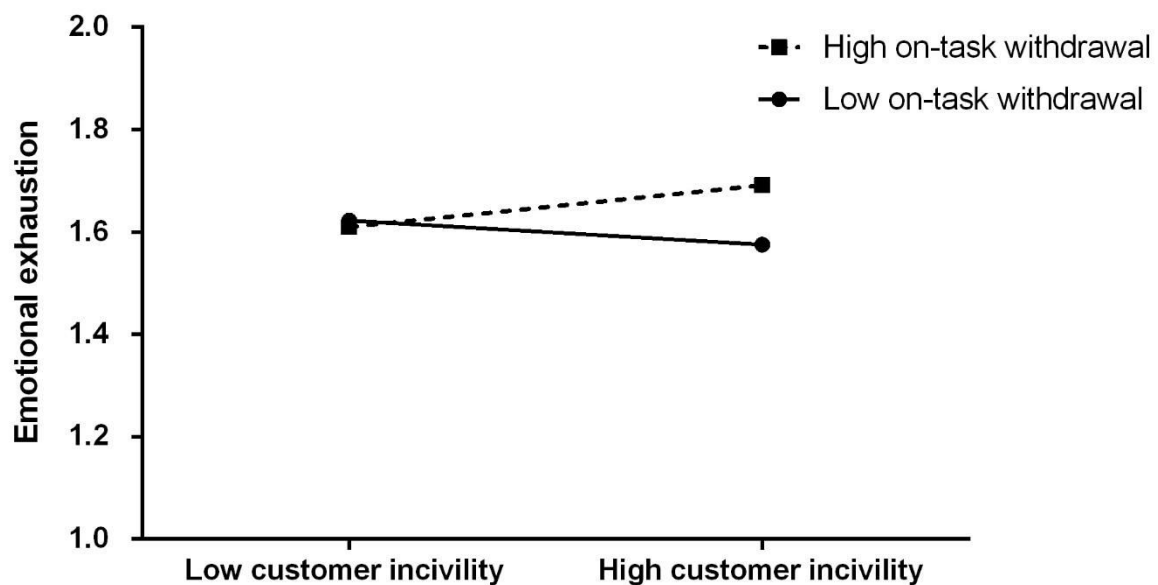


Figure 4: The Interaction Effect between Customer Incivility and On-task Withdrawal on Emotional Exhaustion (Study 2)



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**When Heroes and Villains are Victims: How Different Withdrawal Strategies Moderate the Depleting Effects of Customer Incivility on Frontline Employees**

What happens when a frontline service employee leaves their service counter (‘be right back’) while they are still meant to be ‘on the job’? This type of job ‘withdrawal’ is often frowned upon by both managers and customers, as it is seen as counterproductive and anti-service. Many service organizations have restrictions in place to actively prevent these types of withdrawal behaviors from occurring at work. Frontline employees often internalize these expectations to provide continuous service and are often reluctant to physically withdraw from their tasks while working even when they need to, such as after experiencing abuse from customers.

However, should we continue to demonize these types of withdrawal behaviors? The potential for short-term withdrawal behaviors to have beneficial effects in response to customer incivility is an important issue to investigate as mistreatment by customers is a daily reality for many service employees. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this issue. Examples of customers behaving aggressively, refusing to follow directions, fighting for essential products, and venting negative moods have been widely reported in the media. In a recent paper published in the Journal of Service Research, titled “When heroes and villains are victims: How different withdrawal strategies moderate the depleting effects of customer incivility on frontline employees”, the authors find some counterintuitive results. Examining two disparate service contexts (parking officers and nurses), the authors found consistent support for the replenishing function of short-term “off-task withdrawal” (when a frontline employee takes a short discretionary break by physically removing themselves from the service context while still on the job). Specifically, service employees reported feeling less emotionally exhausted following encounters with uncivil customers when they were able to engage in brief, off-task withdrawal, as this enabled them to recharge their energy and better prepare for subsequent customer encounters. In contrast, continuing to provide service, but substantially reducing the amount of effort during the service encounter (i.e., on-task withdrawal) only functions to exacerbate service employees’ exhaustion.

This paper highlights the negative effects on well-being when employees are unable to take short breaks to recover from customer incivility incidents. Although off-task withdrawal temporarily disrupts the provision of a service, over the long term, it could save organizations significant costs associated with chronic low service quality, employees’ health and well-being, and permanent withdrawal (e.g., turnover).

We urge managers and customers to consider employee withdrawal in more nuanced ways. Strict policies against discretionary withdrawal which restrict employees from being able to take a short timeout, particularly after negative encounters, not only impairs their well-being but also goes against the organization’s interests. Employees who are exhausted following a negative customer encounter are less likely to provide high-quality service and this negatively impacts subsequent customers. Service organizations should grant employees more autonomy in scheduling their work, enabling them to decide when a brief service withdrawal is necessary. More autonomy would allow employees to adjust their work pace based on the immediate situation and would benefit both their well-being and customer outcomes.

## Author Biographies

**Yumeng Yue** is a Lecturer at University of Edinburgh Business School. His research interests focus on customer incivility, service encounter, and service failure.

**Helena Nguyen** is an Associate Professor in Work and Organizational Studies and co-director of the Body, Heart and Mind in Business Research Group at the University of Sydney Business School. Her research is multidisciplinary and her interests include the role of emotions and cognition at work, human performance, work engagement and well-being.

**Markus Groth** is a Professor of Organizational Behavior in the School of Management at the UNSW Business School, Sydney. His research focuses on service management and aims to unravel the complexities of customer service. Much of his research explores the role of emotions in the workplace, specifically, the link between employee experiences of work and service quality experiences of the customers they serve, the behavioral and emotional components of service interactions, as well as the strategies organizations employ to form and maintain relationships with their customers.

**Anya Johnson** is an Associate Professor and Deputy Head of Discipline in Work and Organizational Studies at the University of Sydney Business School. Her research mainly investigates how employees regulate their emotions and cognitions in the workplace, and the relationship between the design of jobs and teams and outcomes such as engagement, wellbeing and performance.

**Stephen Frenkel** is Emeritus Professor of Organization and Employment Relations in the School of Management at the UNSW Business School, Sydney. His current research interests include the sociology and organizational psychology of work and management with a special interest in comparative analysis and the impact of global supply chains on labor standards.